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ABSTRACT

Noting that the majority of teachers use restrictive rather than responsive language, this paper suggests that teachers consider using questioning techniques as a way of making their language more responsive. The paper notes that restrictive language involves teacher control, includes commands and criticisms, discourages independent thinking, and encourages submission, whereas responsive language encourages verbal give-and-take and independent thought, implies choices, includes explanations, and is nurturing and elaborative. The paper then explores ways that questions can be used to make language more responsive. Questions can be used to: (1) communicate positive attitudes and encourage thinking and learning; (2) stimulate language development and cognitive development; (3) enhance self-esteem; (4) manage behavior appropriately; and (5) promote inclusion of special needs children. A questionnaire of appropriate practices in each of these five areas is appended. (HTH)

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Ask, Don't Tell:

The Value of Asking Young Children Questions

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Think of the most common behavior teachers use in the classroom. Now think of the behavior that could be the single most important thing that adults can do to enhance a child's development. Speaking to children could fit both descriptions. The way teachers speak to children reveals their attitudes toward, and relationship with, the children (Stone, 1993). That is, the verbal behavior is an indicator of the total teaching behavior. For example, the choice of words and tone of voice can be used to help the child feel confident and reassured (Read, 1992). Or, teachers can raise their voice in hopes of gaining control of behavior.

Stone (1993) identified two main types of language: responsive and restrictive. Responsive language conveys positive attitudes and acceptance for individuals. Responsive language encourages verbal give-and-take, independent thought, implies choices, includes explanations, and is nurturant and elaborative. Restrictive language, on the other hand, involves teacher control, includes commands and criticisms, discourages independent thinking, and encourages submission. Obviously, the preferred type is responsive, although a small minority of language could appropriately be restrictive (brief lectures, a quick command). Unfortunately, Stone found that a majority of teachers tend to use primarily restrictive language rather than responsive language.

Questioning could be a part of responsive language. Teachers use questions often; they have even been described as the building blocks of the instructional process (Wassermann, 1991). Teachers should consider using questions as a way of making their language

more responsive. Questions can be used to communicate positive attitudes and encourage thinking and learning. Questions can be used effectively in many ways: to stimulate language development and cognitive development, to enhance self esteem, to manage behavior appropriately, and to promote inclusion of special needs children.

Language Development

When children learn language, they are abstracting rules and patterns from the language around them (Cazden, 1972). If children are to advance in language development, they must have interactions with adults using more mature language (Smith, 1972). Adults can expand what children say. For example, if a child says "Want that!", an adult could say, "You must want the pounding bench." Another example is "Me no like break," with the adult responding, "I see you don't like the broken cracker. You must want a whole one."

Children need an atmosphere that encourages language (Bredekamp, 1987). Children need to talk to each other. Teachers need to talk to children individually and encourage them to respond. Requiring children to sit quietly in desks while teachers instruct does little to help advance language development. Children need to play and interact with each other. Teachers can use opportunities within the play situation to encourage language. One could ask, "What did you make with the blocks? Can you tell me about it?" Or, "What might happen when you add water?"

Adults do not need to criticize or correct a child's language to help her progress. The "errors" that adults notice in children 's speech are evidence of the child experimenting and practicing with

the rules of language. According to Smith (1972), children progress in their language development when they take a chance at being "wrong". Corrections and criticisms may discourage the child. Children want to use language and actively struggle to learn it and adults should trust in that process. Additionally, pronunciation errors correct themselves over time as long as the child has a model of correct pronunciation (Lorton & Lorton, 1984). If an adult is concerned about a child's language development, she could try creating situations where language is necessary. For example, at snack time, the teacher could wait for the child to ask for the snack.

Questions can be an excellent tool for creating situations where language is necessary. Questions are more likely to encourage a child to use language than statements. If a child grabs the play-do and says "Gimme!", a teacher could respond with statements: "Take turns with the play-do. He had it first and you can use it when he is finished." A questioning response could be: "Do you want the play-do? Why don't you ask him for it? He had it first but maybe he is finished. Can you say, 'Please give me the play-do'?" The child is more likely to try new vocabulary and expand his language abilities when he is responding to questions, as opposed to statements.

Cognitive Development

Children under age six or seven are preoperational in thought, according to Piaget (1952). This means that their learning is tied to what they do, not what they are told. Children construct their

own knowledge based on their experiences, not on what adults tell them. For example, a child who has a fear of noises may cry when the custodian vacuums the hall. A teacher may reassure the child saying, "It won't hurt you". The child continues to be afraid until she has had enough experiences with a noisy vacuum cleaner that did not result in any harm so that she finally overcomes the fear.

Since young children are not likely to learn very much from what adults tell them, teachers should try asking questions instead. Children learn through play and teachers can ask questions that extend their play and allow them to derive more from the experience. Following are examples of questions that may stimulate thinking:

What are you doing?

What will happen if you take this block away?

What might happen if you put more water in this jar?

Is there another way you could make a driveway with blocks?

What are some different ways to make this?

How does this sand feel to you?

Do you like the lion in this book?

What do you need to do next?

How can you find out?

How is today's play-do different from last week's?

What pattern do you see in these beads?

How many blocks did you use?

Additionally, young children are egocentric (Piaget, 1954). Their thoughts are centered on themselves. A teacher who makes statements to a whole class group may not catch each child's

attention. The child may be lost in his own thoughts or may not even realize the adult is addressing him. Questions directed to individuals or small groups can be more effective. Indeed, most language interaction with infants and toddlers should be on an individual basis, according to developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987). Contrast: "Don't play in the sand box today; it's too wet," with "Chris, do you want to hear about the sand box today? It's too wet for us to use."

Self-Esteem

According to Curry and Johnson (1990), self-esteem is a concept used to describe the fact that how people think and feel about themselves is important. If they feel positively about themselves, people tend to better meet life's challenges. People develop a positive self-esteem from having positive experiences. In general, self-esteem can be thought of as having four dimensions: acceptance, moral worth, power and control, and competence.

Questioning can increase a child's competence in language development. A child who can use language effectively to achieve her goals may be less likely to use aggression or to withdraw, which thereby increases the child's social competence. Also, if questioning is used to increase a child's cognitive competence, as in the methods just discussed, self-esteem can be enhanced.

Questioning can encourage a positive self-esteem because of the individual attention that is part of it. When an adult focuses on a child to ask a question and then waits for a response and accepts it, the child feels a sense of importance, value, and acceptance.

Contrast a teacher saying to a group, "I see you all made a zoo with the blocks," with "Bradley, which animal cage did you make?" The individual child's actions are focused on and valued.

Some children assert their sense of importance and independence by defying adults. Questions can diffuse the situation and make the child feel in control and having power. A statement like "Come inside now," can be met with a strong "No!" Rather, a teacher can ask a child, "When we get inside, will you play with the blocks or cut with the scissors?" The power struggle is avoided and the child gets to make a choice.

For emotional development, it is important for an adult to help identify and accept a child's feelings. Young children often lack the language skills to express their feelings and bottled up or denied feelings can lead to problems both in the present and the future. Adults need to acknowledge a child's right to strong emotions and help him express his emotions in healthy ways (Berne & Berne, 1990). A child who is red in the face and has fists balled up may have a teacher say: "Are you angry? You look so mad to me. Is it because you didn't get a turn on the slide? Can you tell me what is wrong?" To be avoided is an adult who says, "Don't get so mad about such a silly thing," or "Big kids don't cry."

Behavior Management

An important part of managing children's behavior is to communicate what to do, not just what not to do. Suggestions or directions should be stated in a positive form (Read, 1992). It is human nature to say, "Don't hit the toy with the hammer!" but it

could be more effective to say, "Can you use the hammer only on the pounding bench?" or, "What should you do with a hammer?" Questions can focus the child more directly on the appropriate behavior you want her to learn.

Children can learn behavior from observing and imitating models, and models with high status, competence, and power are more effective at influencing the behavior of others (Tuckman, 1991). That is why teachers see themselves among their class all day long. They are models for the children's behavior and often see their actions and words incorporated into what the children do. Thus teachers want to express as much nurturing, respect, and cooperation as possible. Then the children are likely to express the same qualities to each other. If a teacher typically says, "Give me that toy; you're not using it right," the children may also say "Gimme!" and probably grab, too. A calm and respectful series of questions designed to redirect the misbehavior with the toy would be more helpful.

A couple all-purpose questions that teachers can use when they see inappropriate behavior are: "Does that help?" and "What are you doing?" These questions can be particularly helpful at avoiding the sassy retort that can be so common. Children sometimes talk back to teachers to preserve their self-esteem because they have been embarrassed or feel threatened by being corrected.

Teachers often try to recognize appropriate behavior to encourage it. Children enjoy the attention and this technique can be effective unless a comparison is involved. Comparing children may change their behavior but may be damaging to their feelings of

adequacy and their friendliness (Read, 1992). "Jordan is sitting so quietly" is more effective than "Jordan is the quietest." Competition is the opposite of cooperation. Competition does not build friendly, social feelings, but rather resentment or hurt, according to Read. Try a question to avoid this trap: "Who is sitting so nice and quiet?"

When are questions not appropriate? When the child has no choice. Teachers should only offer a child a choice when they intend to leave the situation up to him (Read, 1992). Do not say, "Do you want to pick up toys?" and then scold the child who chooses not to. Either use a statement or phrase your question to reflect a genuine choice: "Would you rather pick up blocks or puzzles today?"

Special Needs

Same age children naturally exhibit a wide range of behaviors as they develop their visual, auditory, language, perceptual, and motor skills and teachers need to be prepared to meet the needs of children whose skills fall outside the normal developmental range (Bredekamp, 1987). These differences in abilities could be interpreted by the teacher as some kind of behavior problem. A child who never picks up toys may just not hear or attend to the signal to pick up. A child who knocks toys around may actually have difficulty controlling her movements. A child may have difficulty in peer relationships because of differences in development.

Rather than assuming that a child is being uncooperative, teachers can direct questions to a child. Disciplining or punishing a child for behavior that is actually a result of a disability or a

normal variation in development can be very harmful to self-esteem. Curry and Johnson (1990) noted that self-esteem is based on a child feeling accepted and competent and teachers need to accept children as they are. Questions can help the teacher discover the child's intentions, guide his behavior, and better understand his abilities. With realistic expectations, the teacher can help the child develop his competencies. Thus, questioning can be a tool a teacher uses to make a successful inclusive environment for children with special needs.

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Appendix

Introduction: Mark each statement as appropriate or inappropriate practice.

1. The teacher's job is to teach vocabulary, correct errors in speech, and talk to the class continually.

2. For cognitive development, teachers should strive to tell children what they need to know, and tell them how to play with and manipulate classroom materials.

3. Teachers should make announcements to the whole class as necessary.

4. Children should not be allowed to say "hate" or other ugly words.

5. Teachers should use stickers or other rewards for the most cooperative children.

6. Good behavior management means getting the children to mind what the teacher says and to know what is not allowed in the classroom.

Language Development: Compose a question as a response to each of these statements from a child.

1. "Hey, that's mine." (said as child grabs a marker away from another child)

2. "More."

3. "It won't work."

Cognitive Development: Practice making questions that stimulate thinking and extend play. Make up a question for each situation.

1. In the housekeeping corner, some children are serving dinner to dolls but don't seem to have enough plates.

2. A child is building a Mr. Potato Head with four noses.

3. A child is struggling with a puzzle at the table.

Self-esteem: Revise these statements into questions that make a child feel accepted, important, competent.

1. Everybody helped put the toys away except you.

2. You shouldn't cry just because he ruined your puzzle. It was an accident.

3. Let me do your buttons for you.

Behavior Management: Rephrase each of these statements into a question that communicates what is appropriate behavior.

1. No running in the hall.

2. Don't throw sand.

3. Look at the mess at the easel. You can't paint anymore.